

quick facts

About...Poliomyelitis (polio)

What is polio?

Polio is caused by a virus that infects the intestinal tract. Most infections do not cause serious illness, but in some cases, people may develop meningitis or become paralyzed. Since 1979, the only polio cases reported in the United States have been identified in people from other countries or associated with oral polio vaccination, which is no longer offered in the United States.

What are the symptoms of polio?

Most persons infected with polio do not develop symptoms at all or may have mild symptoms. Symptoms usually occur 3-35 days after exposure. Mild symptoms include fever, tiredness, headache, sore throat, nausea, and vomiting. In some cases, the illness becomes more severe, and symptoms include severe muscle pain and stiffness in the neck and back. Muscle paralysis may occur in a small percentage of cases, and death may occur if breathing muscles become paralyzed.

How is polio spread?

Polio is spread through contact with the stool or throat secretions of an infected person. Poliovirus must be swallowed to cause infection. This can happen easily when contaminated hands or objects are put into the mouth.

Who is at risk for polio?

Anyone who has not received polio vaccine is at risk for polio, but the greatest risk is to those who travel to or exposed to travelers from areas where polio transmission still occurs (Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India). Increasing age is a risk factor for paralysis following polio infection.

How do I know if I have polio?

Polio is usually associated with travel to a country where it still occurs. If you have been exposed to someone diagnosed with polio and have experienced the symptoms described, see your health care provider. Other illnesses may cause symptoms that resemble polio.

How is polio treated?

Since polio is caused by a virus, antibiotics are ineffective. Currently, there are no antiviral medications used to treat polio. Treatment focuses on relieving the symptoms of the illness.

How can polio be prevented?

The inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) is safe and effective for preventing polio infection. This vaccine is given by injection. Most schools and licensed child-care providers require proof of vaccination or immunity to polio before enrollment. If you have not had polio and/or have no record of having the polio vaccine, see your health care provider to decide if you should receive the vaccine. Since there are countries in the world that still have active polio disease, it is important for travelers to receive the polio vaccine.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/polio/in-short-both.htm>.

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